

JAKE SIEWERT: Welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Jake Siewert, Global Head of Corporate Communications here at Goldman Sachs. And I'm delighted to be joined today by Evan Osnos. Evan is a long-term staff writer at *The New Yorker* where he covers politics and foreign affairs. He's out with an extremely timely new book called *Joe Biden: The Life, the Run, and What Matters Now*.

Evan, thanks so much for joining us today.

EVAN OSNOS: My pleasure. Great to be with you Jake.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, let's start with your own interest in Joe Biden. I mean, he's been a fixture of American life going back to his first run for Senate in '72. But until he took the vice presidency, probably wasn't considered to be sort of a major figure. So, what drew you personally, you've obviously reported this book for a number of years, what drew you to his story?

EVAN OSNOS: You know, I was initially drawn by his portfolio. And then I was kind of drawn in by a bit of his personality. On the portfolio front, frankly, I was interested in the foreign affairs piece of this. I've been a foreign correspondent for a long time. I'd spent, you know, at that point about a decade abroad, most recently in China. And he had a lot of that on his plate. I mean, as he used to say, President Obama would send him to the places he didn't want to go. And that consisted mostly of Capitol Hill where President Obama was not as eager to go. And then a lot of places around the world. And so, Biden found himself on Air Force Two much of the time.

Now, the piece of that that was the second part was the personal piece of it, which is, and I didn't know this going in, frankly, the first time I interviewed him in the West Wing I discovered, as I think you know and as others may have discovered over the years, is that he can't help himself but tell you what he actually thinks. And I found that to be quite productive in terms of understanding this moment in our politics. He was sitting in quite an advantageous position to be able to read the field, look at Congress, analyze it, read his own party, tell you what was going on in the White House. And so, I discovered it. But I went back and back. That he was interested in being talked to. And I was happy to listen.

JAKE SIEWERT: Yeah. So, my son's favorite anecdote, my 12 year old read this book before I did. I had to steal it from him to finish it off. But he loved the fact that Biden started his political career running for the Senate. And he was 29 years

old. Which means he was too young to even be in the Senate when he was running. So, why did he first run so prematurely, in some ways? And what does it say about him five decades later?

EVAN OSNOS: It was a wild thing to do to run at that point in that race. I mean, he was, to call him an underdog, doesn't really capture it. He was nobody. And in the State of Delaware there was basically one major political figure. And that was the Senator Caleb Boggs. He had had every major office in the state. And he'd been in office for a quarter century. Was a World War II vet. And here's this guy named Joe Biden who really didn't know anybody.

And what's interesting about it is the reason why Biden ran, if you really pressed him on it, would be that it was an outgrowth of something that began when he was a kid. Because we all know he had a stutter. But that experience of having a stutter and breaking the back of it, of sort of mastering it by memorizing the Declaration of Independence, reciting things in front of the mirror, that gave him almost a kind of preternatural sense of self confidence, probably even a little more self confidence than was good for him if he was going to tell you the story. And that gave him the idea that, well, sure, why not run for the Senate?

And he went out on the campaign trail with his wife and now late wife, Neilia Hunter, and their three little kids. And they were a very appealing group. And here he was. What he positioned himself as in that race, you'll remember, was he was the young guy. And he went around, the ads in the newspaper and the slogan that he used was, "Joe Biden understands what's happening now." And so in some ways it was a kind of prelude to the generational politics which we see a bit of today, except he was on the other end of it.

And I think the fact of that makes him alert to the moment that we're in. He knows that this is a period in which there are a lot of younger Americans, more liberal Americans than he is in some cases, who believe that it's time for a transition. And what you hear him describing is, he puts it himself is, I want to be a transition president. Meaning, I want to make room on the field, make room on the bench for people who are coming up. That's an outgrowth of his own experience.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, you obviously spent some time with Ted Kaufman who's a long-term friend of Joe Biden's. And he said, put it very well, he said, "Biden's both the luckiest and the

unluckiest guy he's ever met." You know, he just had a brutal series of events happen to him, both early in his career and more recently, the death of his first wife and daughter. How do you think that explains who he is today?

EVAN OSNOS: You know Jake, that sentence, that line to me was the origin of this project. I really kind of thought about the meaning of that idea, this sense that he has had both the greatest things a person can have happen to them and the worst thing. And it began to reveal itself as a sort of deep text to understanding his political mindset.

And what it means is that he has had the experience of both willing himself into a completely different world. You know, getting himself into office at the age of 29, 30 years old. And then getting through these, you know, failed presidential campaigns a couple of times. And eventually, getting himself into position of being the vice president to the first black American president. This is a trajectory that in some ways would validate his belief that you can, by sheer mastery and labor, you can put yourself into the great moments of opportunity.

And then he has the counter evidence, which is that the world will sometimes deal you fates that you cannot control, and you would never pursue. And in fact, that they would hobble you, throw you on your back. And I think it's the combination of these two things, the awareness that any one of us is not really the author of our own experience entirely, and neither one of us is-- or none of us are really entirely captive to the circumstances around us. It is that strange alchemy of the two, that is his fundamental political idea. And that shapes how he thinks about using government to try to help people.

JAKE SIEWERT: You spoke to President Obama for this book, obviously. He told you that one of Biden's goals from a 40,000-foot level, when you look at it from that level, they're not that much different from a Bernie Sanders. Which I'm not sure if that helps or hurts him with his own party. But if you had to describe Biden's political doctrine, what would it be and how has it evolved from his years in the Senate and now to the presidency?

EVAN OSNOS: Well, what's interesting is when President Obama said that to me, of course he was thinking at the time, I know this from the context of the moment in which we're having the conversation, he's trying to reassure people on the left end of the Democratic Party that this is a guy that you can

fundamentally support. Somebody who believes in the broadest sense in the ideas that you believe in. But he would know, and I think in any granular detail, he and Bernie Sanders have a lot that divides them.

What's interesting to me though is Bernie Sanders was asked, early on, right after he endorsed Joe Biden, he said-- you know, people asked, "Why did you endorse Joe Biden much faster than you endorsed Hillary Clinton?" And his answer was, "Look, there's a lot of things that Joe Biden and I disagree on, but fundamentally he has always been willing to listen." And I think that idea then begins to get you a sense of his theory of government. How Joe Biden thinks about it.

His belief is, I have to be able to go into a room with a person who I disagree with, sometimes fiercely, but I have to be able to project to that person that I am willing to hear them out. And it's not superficial. I'm not just patronizing them. And I am not, and this is the key word, I am not trying to educate them on what their own interests are.

As he put it to me, you know, people generally have a pretty good idea of their own interests. And my job is to try figure out how do I make my interests and their interests meet? Not, how do I tell them why they're wrong from the outset?

JAKE SIEWERT: Yeah, that's a lot of experience in the US Senate trying to get to 50 votes. So, in '08 when Biden was tapped by then nominee Barack Obama to be his vice president, it wasn't a role that Biden initially embraced. You talk about he ended up taking a very specific role when it came to foreign policy. How did he come to embrace being number two? And what do you think his tenure as vice president means for his presidency?

EVAN OSNOS: It's really interesting. Because having been in the vice presidency, it fundamentally shapes how he sees the relationship as a partnership. Not every president does. You know? A lot of times these are really shotgun marriages that are kind of this combination of political expediency and maybe some larger sense of the long-term future of the party. That's not how he thinks about it.

I mean, when he came into the job, as he described to me for the book, look, he actually had a pretty flawed interpretation of what the vice presidency would be and could be. You know? He said, "I wanted to be a vice president like Lyndon Johnson." Because he thought that meant being helping a younger president

understand Congress, help him fill in the blanks of what he might not know.

What he then discovered, partially by reading Robert Caro, was that LBJ hated being in the vice presidency. And so then he said, okay, that's not the vice presidency I want to have. What I want to have, and what I came to believe, is that the vice presidency is only with the president makes it. If it's-- you can turn your vice president into somebody who goes to ribbon cuttings and is largely there waiting for your heart to give out. Or you can make your vice president a real partner. And his belief was that's what Obama wanted and needed, particularly on foreign affairs and on relations with Congress. And what he wants out of Kamala Harris is a real partnership. This is not a case in which he is saying, "I just want somebody down the hall." He believes the two of them are better together than they are apart.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, let's go to the most recent race. It obviously wasn't his first time running for presidency. He lost in 1988. Got really embarrassingly sort of hounded out of the race. That was documented in a great book *What It Takes* by Richard Ben Cramer. Biden now calls that an unconscious act of plagiarism that really caught up with him.

He ran again in '08. And I still remember the night he had to bow out in Iowa where, I don't even think they had lights for the room in which it was a pretty ignominious exit after the Iowa caucuses in '08. What do you think he took away from the losing campaigns as he started this one during this particular moment in history?

EVAN OSNOS: It's actually quite interesting, Jake, how he thinks about the '88 race especially. For a long time, he was pretty defensive about it. I mean, he would often feel as if he got hounded out of the race by the press. It bothered him the way it ended. It didn't feel like it was a dignified way to establish yourself on the national scene. And by 2008, so 20 years after the end of that first race, he'd kind of come to terms with it. And he said at the time, "Look, the honest answer is I wasn't ready to be president back then. I was," and this is his word, "I was too arrogant about it." And I think there's a real arc of his career that you see over the long term in which he settles down. He becomes a more mature figure. A bit of a calmer figure.

Because the younger Joe Biden, the one who is so wonderfully

described in *What It Takes* by Richard Ben Cramer, as you mentioned, was a bumptious guy, a guy who's always trying to elbow his way into the room. Sort of slightly reminding everybody that he was there. And the one that you see later in his career, particularly now, is somebody who is at peace with who he is and what he's done in his life.

And curiously, Jake, I think, and he would admit this, it was only after he gave up the idea of being president that he probably made himself somebody who was going to be president. That it was part of that process of coming to terms with it that made him as electable as he is.

JAKE SIEWERT: You talked to Jake Sullivan who has a great name, was tapped to be Biden's National Security advisor. He said the strategy would be, go fast, be bold. And you write that Biden's prescriptions for America's troubles would be informed by two divergent strands of his biography: the miss that undergirded the politics of responsibility, and his own encounters with misfortune. What do you think that says about Biden's first 100 days? And, you know, what does he want to get done?

EVAN OSNOS: You know, it won't shock you Jake to know that that comment from Jake Sullivan was before they knew that the Senate was probably going to be in the hands of Republicans. We won't know entirely until after Georgia. But one thing is also clear. They are not waiting around to see if they're going to get a legislative reception before deciding what they can do. One thing about having a bit of scar tissue on this incoming group, on this cabinet and on the President Elect is they know how to use the levers of the executive branch. What can you do, in fact, with a hostile Congress? Starting on day one with things like rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement. Rejoining the World Health Organization. Which is partly about trying to manage the COVID epidemic. But it's also partly about sending a message to the rest of the world that the United States is, you know, is back, in a sense.

But one of the things that I think they're going to focus on in that period is trying to begin to rebuild the professional ranks of the government. It's been hobbled, seriously, over the course of the last few years. Take the State Department. Just the number of people that applied to take the Foreign Service exam is down dramatically. The hiring, the ranks of people at the hiring. I mean, I talk to foreign diplomats a lot. And one of the things you hear them say is it is a ghost town over at the State Department on the United States side. "We don't know who

to talk to. The people who we usually deal with are gone." So, there is a certain level of fundamental kind of remedial rebuilding that has to go on. And that's the kind of thing they're going to have to focus on, whether or not they have a friendly Congress or not.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, you mentioned, Evan, you spent a lot of time in your career reporting from China and other parts around the world. How do you think the rest of the world sees this administration? How do you think Joe Biden's expertise on foreign policy will inform his actions as president? And you said America will be back at some level. But it's a very different world right now. How do you think that plays out?

EVAN OSNOS: I think that's a crucial point. I mean, the reality is you cannot go into office in 2021 thinking that you're inheriting the world you left behind in 2017. I mean, part of it is, you know, there are things that have changed outside of America's control. And then there are elements of the American image that have been radically transformed. I mean, I think there is certainly if we talk about Asia, there is a feeling among America's allies that they're not entirely sure if we're going to be there for them in the long term. I mean, we went through a period in which countries like South Korea found themselves on very fragile terrain with the United States. And they are beginning to say, "Look, we know that in the long run we're going to be neighbors with China whether we like it or not. And we have to contend with that. And we're not all that sure what it means for the United States to be a Pacific nation." Barack Obama called it that. And I think there's a real question about how is the United States going to conduct itself in a world in which-- China is making a play for global leadership. But it's not by any means achieving it. And I think there is a real opportunity right now for the United States to begin to say to other countries, "Look, we understand that we just scared you for the last four years. But we are still fundamentally committed to a couple of things: alliances and the credibility of doing what we say we will do." And if you can begin to do that, that's, in some ways, that's more important. It's the primary activity before you can begin to go out and achieve individual policy objectives on the foreign policy front.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, the current president, President Trump had a notoriously complicated and difficult relationship with the press. On the one hand oftentimes very hostile to them on his social media accounts. On the other hand, he knew a lot of them.

Had a ton of them on speed dial. Talked to a lot of reporters individually and understood in a real way how the press works. You've interviewed Biden throughout his career. What do you make of his relationship with the press? And how do you think the administration will act, interact with the media relative to the current administration?

EVAN OSNOS: I think there are a lot of reporters that are going to miss having a president who is so seduced by the proximity of a microphone that he just cannot resist. I mean, as we know, President Trump will come over on his way to Marine One, or whenever the moment arises, even when it's contrary to his own political interests, and he will talk to you. And a lot of times he's, you know, doing the spade work for the reporters of sometimes digging the hole a little deeper. That is not we're you're going to get, I say with, in grief from my colleagues, from a Biden administration. It is a more conventional relationship with the press.

You know, in some ways Biden's relationship to the press is a throwback. I mean, he does rely on the kind of classical sources of information. He reads *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* in print. You know? He reads a bit of *The Economists*, reads *New Yorker*. He is not checking to see what the latest Newsmax headlines are. Doesn't care what OANN has to say. He does use Apple News a lot. I actually think that's a sort of underappreciated sort of insight for him outside of those usual sources. But this is going to be something that is going to be a little more recognizable as a relationship to the press, something that you would recognize, Jake, from a relationship between a White House and a press corps.

JAKE SIEWERT: Well, Evan, thank you so much for joining us today.

EVAN OSNOS: My pleasure, Jake. Thanks for having me.

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